

Even in Defeat, a Beautiful Performance

by Michael A. Stackpole

Master Okurimono remained hidden in the shadow of a red dolmen. It would only be a matter of time before she detected his presence, but he considered that time precious. *It could even be that she knows I am here, but affects not to notice and allow me to save face if I have given myself away.*

Below him, Torako moved through the small valley beneath a crystalline dome, flowing as once water might have on Mars. Slender and beautiful, with long dark hair flowing down over the shoulders of a red silken robe, the woman who had once been his student walked through the garden he'd created. The plants, miniatures all, had been tended carefully and while none was rooted in Martian soil, their shapes complemented the natural lines of rock and dirt.

They are like us, transplants that join in harmony with the world.

Okurimono watched as she lifted a hand to caress a branch or shift a pot by a centimeter or two. Those movements, so delicate and precise, hinted at her purposeful study of many things, including the martial arts. Though she could have been taken as an innocent woman-child, suitable only for the caresses of flower petals and the writing of poetry, Torako was, at heart, a warrior whose skill made her the match of almost any creature in the solar system.

Master Okurimono caught himself; for once, he would have considered her better than all but a few warriors. That had been in the time before the Mumon Rift appeared and two alien races — belligerent, disharmonious races — entered the solar system. They continued their war with each other, and joined the conflict with humanity. Where before the Gongen of Mars needed only worry about Earthers and Mavericks, now two more enemies had been added; and the demands on warriors like Torako had increased exponentially.

He slipped from the shadow and deliberately let a sandal scuff on the second step down. Torako did not react, so he descended two more steps before making the sound again. The woman stiffened, then turned in his direction. She bowed low and long, deeply respectful, and held it for the duration a child might when expecting punishment.

Okurimono noted all this but did not wonder at it. Torako's coming to him had surprised him, and that surprise had been increased when he had been informed that she came without armor or swords. Her visit was not to inform him of victories she'd won. *She has come seeking advice about life, not war.*

He smiled broadly, and opened his arms in welcome. "Kujiko Torako-san, you honor me."

"I am the one honored, Okurimono-sama." Torako smiled and looked up into his face. "You look very well, Master."

The old man shook his shaved head. "You are most kind, Torako. Come, sit with me, for this body finds ease in the surrender to gravity." He crossed to a flat shelf of rock and sat, then patted the space beside him.

She approached and sat, but did not relax. She kept her profile toward him and studied a tiny pine tree in a small alcove across the way. Silence fell in the domed garden and strain as one might, not a hint of air

filtering and concentrating machinery hidden deep below could be detected. Everything in the garden remained at peace save for Torako herself.

"Master, I find myself in chaos. I have lost my sense of harmony and connection to Gongen, my people, my family, and even myself." She gently swept a hand out to take in the garden. "Even here, a place of sanctuary and one I have revered for decades, I feel held apart."

Okurimono nodded slowly. "This has been since your fight with the Shi?"

"Yes, but I do not think it is the cause."

"No, it is not, Torako." Okurimono smiled slowly. "Friends made available to me the surveillance holos of the incident at Ceres Station."

Torako glanced down, blushing. Her voice shrank. "I am sorry to have dishonored your teaching so."

The old man smiled and reached out to caress a burning cheek with a skeletal finger. "If you believe that is what I saw when I watched, you have forgotten too many things, Little Tiger. I saw no shame."

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Torako had not liked descending to the depths of Ceres. Whereas other stations tended to have districts where Gongen, Earthers, and Mavericks gathered, this place had levels. Down in the dark, Mavericks with their cybernetic enhancements dwelled; and here the most violent and sociopathic thrived. Among them would be leads to uncovering information about Raving Red-Jane, and that data would allow Torako to settle a blood debt between her family and the murderous Maverick pirate.

The station's underworld made her shiver. On Gongen — as Mars had been renamed — everything possible was done to maintain a harmonious relationship between human construction and the planet. Local forms suggested function and the best constructions were those that created the least amount of impact on the planet itself.

The station seemed intended to maximize the chaos. Dark and dirty, it stank of sweat and decay. She stepped around a one-legged figure huddled beneath a blanket against a wall. The creature, with the light from one baleful mechanical eye glowing in the shadows, lifted a cup and croaked at her. "A credit? Five? Need to get half my leg back from repairs."

She whirled and glared.

He shrank back, raised a hand protectively, and banged into the metal crutches that were leaning against the wall behind him. "Keep the swords home, lady. One of your kind cost me that half a leg."

Before she could comment, a rough voice rasped from behind her. "Shut up, rust-stain."

"Yes, sir, being quiet now." The one-legged man cowered.

A tall slender man with a shock of black hair and a mechanical right arm that ended in a trident of claws emerged from the shadows to Torako's right and slowly eclipsed the cripple. The man's features had an angular cast, and the shadow of a beard sharpened them in the dim light. She caught a flowery scent from

him, but it lost a battle against mold, sweat, and smoke. He looked her up and down, then smiled, his teeth yellowed ivory or dark steel.

"You're a long way from Gongen, missy."

"And anxious to return."

"I don't think so, not with you asking the questions you've been asking." He dipped his left hand into a pocket and pulled out a coin with a gold cast to it. "You've been relatively free with credits. That's gotten you to me."

Torako nodded. "And, if I have gotten to you, you know what I want."

"Janey, the Red Raver." He licked his lips slowly, his thick tongue moving like a slug over them. "So, the question becomes, do you have enough credits to make it worth my while to sell her to you, or do I give you to her so she has a new toy?"

Torako cocked her head. "I was told that you, Kinnet, were her second in command. Was I wrong? Should I have been seeking out Starhawk instead?"

Kinnet turned his head and spat. "Starhawk is old data, corrupt at that. I'm Jane's second, and it pays for me to keep her happy."

"But would it not be better to replace her? Then others would have to keep you happy."

"There's many things would make me happy." Kinnet raised his right hand and the claws flexed. Talons slowly grew out of them. "You might be one of them. You're Gongen, just like Janey was once a time ago. Maybe *you* could make me happy."

Torako's eyes hardened. "Name your price."

He laughed aloud and took half a step back from her. "It's not one you'd be prepared to pay. If you were, I wouldn't be prepared to accept. Jane doesn't like Gongen, and you're not the first who's taken exception to how she's treated prisoners. If I took you as a lover, she'd know it before the sheets got dry. Right, boys? One of you would turn me in, wouldn't you?"

Shuffles and clanks sounded from behind her, but Torako didn't bother to turn around. "You have one chance to reconsider, Kinnet. I may not be the first, but I *will* be the last."

"Good, a feisty one." A click sounded from his forearm as a small wedge snapped out at the wrist. "Not the most powerful laser in the world here, but enough to kill you. Remove the swords and we'll make sure things don't hurt too much."

She let her eyes half close and shoulders slump, then she dropped her right hand to the hilt of her sword and flowed into action. The silvered blade flashed in the half-light. The draw-cut should have bisected Kinnet, but he'd leaped back. With him momentarily out of range, she continued her spin and allowed the sword's arc to dip. As she came fully about, she swept the blade up again.

A Maverick with a pair of metal arms had been reaching for her. Torako's cut avoided the arm, but the tip caressed the man's armpit. It bit into flesh and cut deep, severing a hydraulic line and the brachial artery. Fluid gushed black in the darkness and the man howled. His other mechanical hand tried to stem the flow as he reeled away to the right.

Bringing the blade up and around, Torako reversed the arc and brought it down. It struck off a woman's hand, but not before the trigger finger could tighten and loose a blast of coherent light. It sizzled past close enough to Torako's face that she could feel the heat and was temporarily blinded, but that did not stop her. She spun and lashed out with her right foot, catching the woman in the chest. Torako's foe flew back and clanged into a tangle of pipes and conduits.

Before that woman could sag to the gritty floor, Torako crouched and lunged. Her attack took her below the cut of a shortsword. Her enemy's artificial eyes glowed red for a moment as Torako's blade spitted him from navel to spine, then useless legs collapsed. He fell back, sliding off her blade, and Torako came up, looking into the face of a scared young man who had filled both hands with laser pistols.

The pistols trembled.

The tip of her sword remained motionless, save for the slow progress of a bloody rivulet working down toward the hilt.

"I think you want to drop those pistols, Peekay, before she takes your hands with them."

Torako looked up into the boy's eyes. Fear and determination warred there. He knew she couldn't be faster than light, but three of his companions lay groaning and bleeding around him. He glanced toward the man who had spoken, then back at her again.

Torako shook her head. Once.

The boy opened his hands and sank to his knees as the pistols clattered into pieces on the floor.

She kicked the pieces away from him and turned to where Kinnet lay sprawled in the one-legged man's lap. Kinnet's mechanical arm had been crushed beneath the one mechanical leg, while the cripple's left arm had been wrapped around the Maverick's throat. The crutch that had been used to sweep Kinnet's legs from beneath him lay on the ground beside him.

"I'm old data, am I, chum?" The cripple leaned forward, getting his mouth right beside the man's ear. "You left me to die in an asteroid. You fitted me with bird-legs. I bet you thought that was funny."

"It *was* funny."

A tightening of the arm cut off any further comment. "You know, Kinnet, I never liked your sense of humor. Never. I know that chokes you up. See, a joke."

The purple-faced pirate tried to protest, but could only manage a gurgle.

"Now here's the deal, Kinnet. You're going to be giving Torako the information she wants. You're going to do that because it's information I want."

"And if I don't, you kill me?"

"Nope."

"You get the Gongen to do your dirty work for you?"

"Heh. You wish." Starhawk bit the man's ear. "Listen closely. I've recorded a message. It'll go to Janey. It says you got me off the rock where she wanted me planted. It's set to go unless I input computer codes that stop the transmission. What do you think Jane's going to do to you when she gets it?"

Kinnet struggled against Starhawk's grip, but it didn't help him. "She'll know you're lying."

"No, she won't. If she catches you, you'll die horribly. If she doesn't... well, we both know she will."

"What's to say you don't sell me out to her even if I give you the information?"

Torako tapped one of his boots with her sword. "You have my word of honor."

Starhawk looked up for a moment, then nodded slowly. "That's a better deal than I was going to give you. Spill it, or I'm turning you into a puzzle someone else can put back together. Maybe. In a year or two. Or three."

Kinnet winced and lifted his chin. "Titan Seven-Three."

Starhawk's face slackened. "Seven-Three? How did she manage that?"

Kinnet laughed. "You thought she took you out because she hated you? Nope. You'd made some other enemies, Hawk, nasty ones. She did their bidding and it'll take better than you and your Martian razor to bring anyone to account."

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Master Okurimono let his finger fall from her cheek. "Your performance was flawless, Torako. Oushi would have slain them all without thinking. The setting all but demanded it, yet you saw this was not so. You ended their threats, not their lives, and this has great value."

"You are kind, Master."

"On the contrary, I am too spare in my praise. You know that the youth who dropped his pistols will swear you were faster than light. The others will likely say there were many of you. They will say they walked into a Gongen trap and were lucky to escape. Their sense of our invulnerability and implacability means they will hesitate. Because of your action we might never need fight them again. Death would just promote fear, but mercy will spawn awe."

"Thank you, Master." Torako looked down again. "Then you did not detect the disharmony?"

The old man smiled. "It was apparent from the first. You drew your sword slowly, forcing Kinnet into his grasp. More importantly, you had utter confidence that he would not allow you to come to harm. I know Starhawk was complicit in your cousins' deaths. You believe you should hate him, but you do not."

"Exactly. My feelings do not match my duty. I am forced from harmony."

"It is not the conflict of emotions with duty that troubles you, Little Tiger." Okurimono smiled slowly. "How you feel about him and your duty are unconnected. There should be no linkage there. You will do your duty. Your cousins will be avenged. The disharmony has another source."

She turned her head to slowly face him. "I do not. . . ." Her face closed for a moment, then she nodded. "I believed my duty would require me to hate Starhawk. I should hate him, for he was the one who caused my cousins' deaths."

"But you do not hate him."

"No."

"Hating him would make doing your duty easier. Your disharmony comes from the conflict between your feelings for him, and those feelings you believe you *should* have for him."

"And how do I resolve that conflict?"

Master Okurimono half-closed his eyes. "You release what you think you should feel and move into harmony with your feelings."

"And when it comes time to do my duty? When it comes time to slay him?"

"Duty we do not because of emotion, but because of commitment to the society as a whole. Duty is greater than any individual."

"So Starhawk will help me deal with those who killed my cousins, and then duty dictates I slay him as well."

The old man nodded. "That is the way of things."

She regarded him openly. "Duty is not meant to be easy."